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How Trump's internet built and broadcast the Capitol insurrection

Online extremists started planning the chaos of January 6 months ago.

By [Rebecca Heilweil](#) and [Shirin Ghaffary](#) | Jan 8, 2021, 5:00pm EST



People associated with far-right online movements such as QAnon breached the Capitol on Wednesday. | Saul Loeb/AFP via Getty Images

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Ali Alexander, a far-right activist and conspiracy theorist, posted a [video](#) to YouTube on Christmas Day, urging people to come to Washington, DC, on the day that Congress would finalize Joe Biden's election to the US presidency.

With a triumphant soundtrack, the video features President Trump at a rally declaring, "We will never give in. We will never give up, and we will never back down. We will never ever surrender." It urges people to register to attend on a website, [WildProtest.com](#), directing them to get to the Capitol building by 1 pm on the day of the event. The website even offered to help people find rides to get there.

This was just one of a slew of efforts from online communities that came together for the insurrection at the United States Capitol on Wednesday that left at least five people dead and many more injured. Many of these groups had been building enthusiasm online for such an event for years. They planned Wednesday's event on social media and, as it was happening, gleefully livestreamed the destruction.

The events represent a turning point for the nation in its reckoning with the impact of online extremism. While misinformation researchers have warned for years of the growing influence of groups like QAnon, the Proud Boys, and neo-Nazis, Wednesday's storming of the Capitol was the clearest evidence yet that these movements threaten to destabilize American democracy.

It's now undeniable that extremists online, ignited and enabled by Trump, have a real-world impact on US politics. And although Facebook and Twitter [have taken unprecedented action](#) to limit Trump's accounts in the wake of this disaster, many of the president's social media supporters have already established deeply intertwined networks of online communities that continue to encourage future chaos and sow doubt in the democratic process.

The Capitol mob began organizing weeks ago for the violence that occurred on January 6, planning inside conspiracy theory and far-right online communities on platforms like Parler and Gab. Groups that typically live in the darker corners of the

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For the many experts who have long warned that internet platforms had not done enough to curb extremism and misinformation, the event demonstrated how online radicalization could lead to violence and even threaten US democracy.

The disarray and violence in Washington on January 6 drew a big audience, too. More than 23 million people watched the event on cable news stations — it was the most-watched day in CNN's 40-year history, averaging 5.22 million viewers — and millions more followed along online via livestreams. There were more than 4.6 million mentions of unrest at the Capitol between 12 am and 6:30 pm ET that day, according to Zignal Labs, a firm that tracks online misinformation. The number of mentions first spiked after Trump spoke at the “Save America” rally in front of the White House and then surged after the mob breached the Capitol.

While the tumult was stunning, it was not surprising. The groups that stormed Capitol Hill this week have long been active on platforms like Gab and 4chan, and more recently, they've adopted newer tools like the lightly moderated social media site Parler and the anonymous messaging service Telegram to organize. Some have continued to use mainstream platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. Still, some say these disparate online communities linking up and taking to the streets on live TV was inevitable.

“Online extremism isn't ever just online,” said Nina Jankowicz, a researcher on online misinformation at the Woodrow Wilson Center. “We've seen so many examples this year of hate speech and incitement spilling over into real life. What happened yesterday is another extension of that.”

Years of online radicalization led to the Capitol riot

For years, members of movements like QAnon, the Proud Boys, and the Three Percenters, a far-right militia group — not to mention hordes of white supremacists and conspiracy theorists — have been allowed to accumulate and grow on platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. While the mainstream social networks have taken action to restrict and even ban the groups, many had already achieved a significant level of organization, leaving critics to say that the crackdown came too late.

“Social media platforms, for years, have allowed their algorithms to boost disinformation and far-right organizing,” said Fadi Quran, campaign director at the human rights group Avaaz. “In DC, we saw QAnon conspiracists and other militias that would never have grown to this size without being turbo-charged by Facebook and Twitter.”

He added, “The platforms are still reacting with Band-Aid policies instead of the surgical procedures needed to fix this problem, like detoxing their algorithms and providing clear retroactive corrections.”

Violent events like the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, the attack at the Christchurch mosque, and the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting often have their roots in anger and bigotry that festers online. It's also undeniable that Trump and his high-profile followers have become instigators. By spreading misinformation and false claims that the election was stolen — and by giving tacit approval to groups like QAnon and the Proud Boys — Trump's online rhetoric excited his base and encouraged the storming of the Capitol.

Pro-Trump pages on mainstream sites like Facebook and Twitter amped up the event, with some latching onto Trump's December tweet claim that January 6 would be “wild.”

Meanwhile, a host of pro-Trump websites, including trumpmarch.com, wildprotest.com, and stopthesteal.us, boosted interest in the event. There's also evidence that specific instructions for taking the Capitol appeared on sites like Parler, 4chan, and Gab.

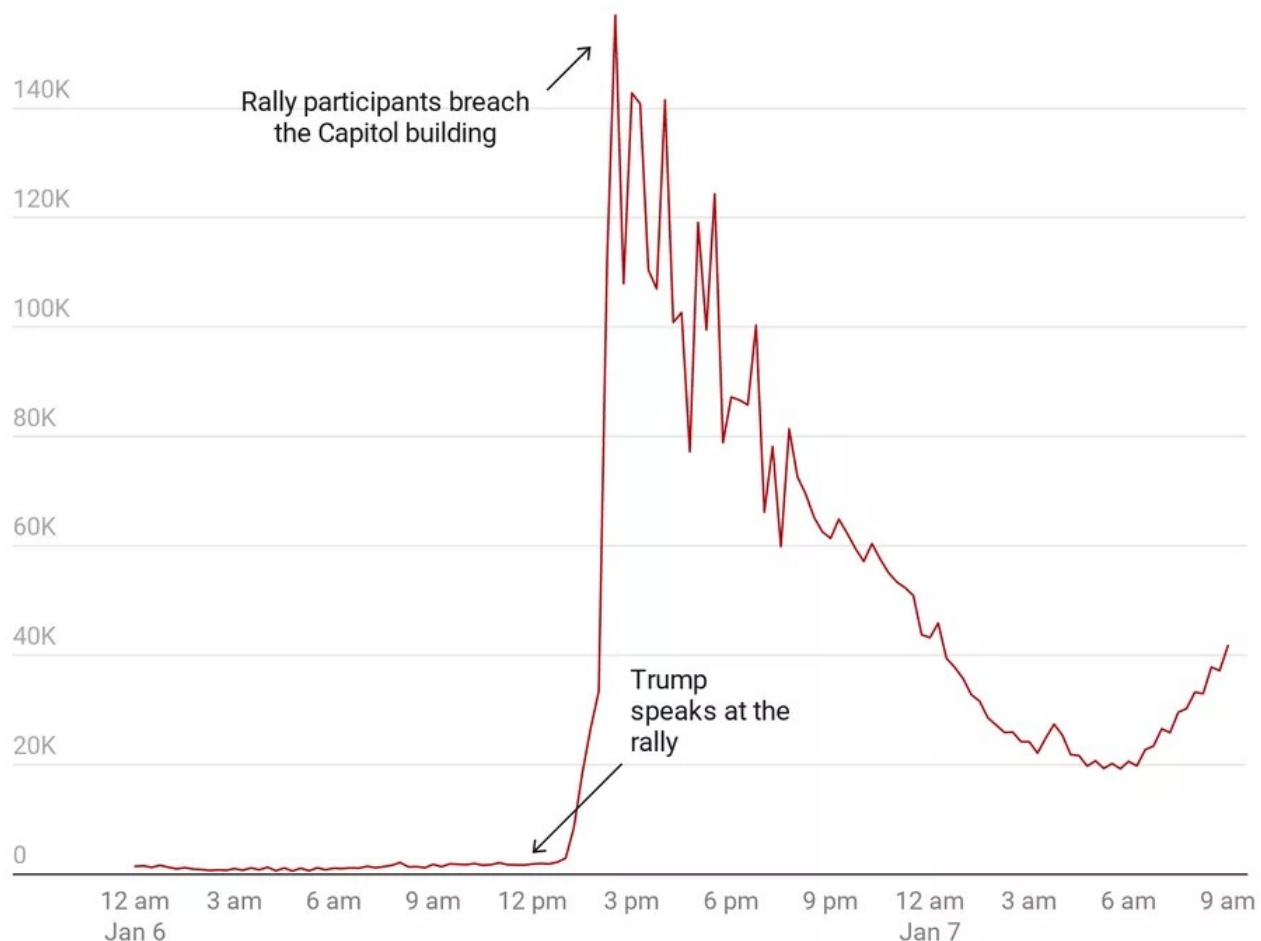
“These are unmoderated closed spaces where only people with fringe and extremist ideologies spend their time,” said



These were the spaces where people who planned to attend the rally openly discussed potential violence at Trump's "Save America" rally on January 6. In one Facebook group called Red-State Secession, which was eventually taken down, people posted about the weapons they planned to carry with them to the event, [according to the New York Times](#). Telegram, Parler, [Reddit](#), and sites like TheDonald.win, a forum that's an offshoot of a banned Donald Trump subreddit, [also hosted](#) discussion about sneaking guns into the event.

In the weeks and days leading up to January 6, a slew of hashtags implied that violence could occur at the rally. Many posted #Jan6 encouraging excitement about the date, but others implied even further disruption, including #wildprotest (presumably referencing Trump's "wild" tweet), #fightback, and #midnightridge, according to research from First Draft, a misinformation and disinformation research firm.

Mentions of unrest jumped after Trump's "Save America" rally speech



Signal Labs tracked mentions of unrest-related terms like "storm the Capitol" on social media and across the internet.

Source: Signal Labs

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4chan as well as online factions, like the Proud Boys, white supremacist extremists, and communities associated with QAnon.

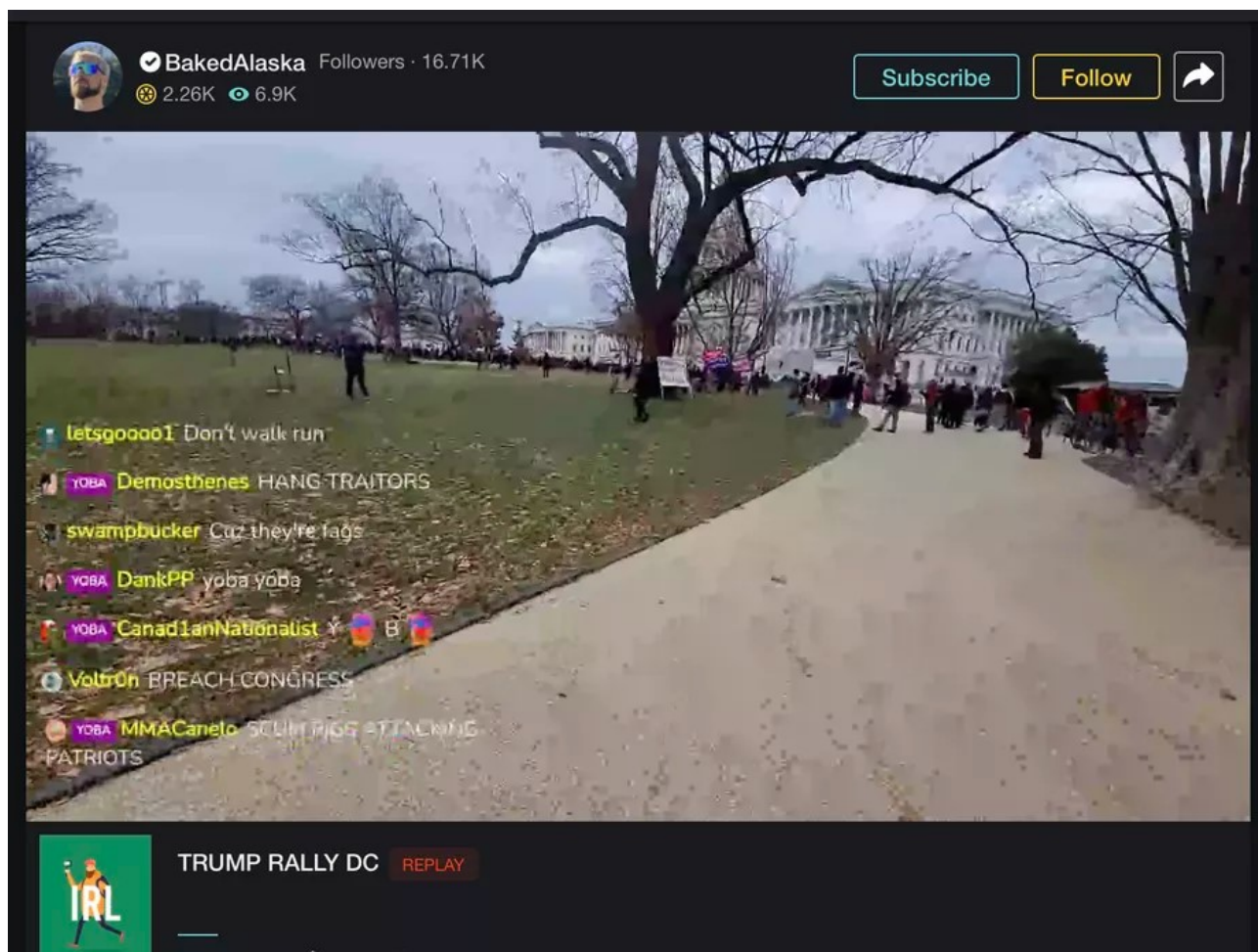
Meanwhile, the president continued to rile up his base. Trump said in a tweet that Washington was “being inundated with people who don’t want to see an election stolen.” And if the fuse for an explosive situation had been laid out in the weeks preceding the event, Trump lit the match when he concluded his speech at the rally by declaring that he and his supporters were going to give Republicans the “kind of pride and boldness that they need to take back our country.” Trump urged the crowd to “walk down Pennsylvania Avenue.”

The mob stayed online during the violence

As the rally turned into the insurrection on Capitol Hill, swaths of online agitators remotely encouraged violence of the event. As the mob streamed video and posted about their activities on social media, commenters urged them to break into the Capitol building.

Tim Gionet, who goes by the handle Baked Alaska online, was one of the more prominent livestreamers present. The 33-year-old was not unknown before January 6: Gionet had already been labeled as a white nationalist by the Southern Poverty Law Center, and he’d previously been booted from both Twitter and YouTube. On the day of the Capitol insurrection, he turned to the platform DLive, a blockchain-based service where he has more than 16,000 followers.

One video, viewed about 7,000 times, shows Gionet wearing a brown jacket and black hat, walking around the Capitol, while the livestream’s viewers encourage him to go inside the building.



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“They’re storming the Capitol,” one user wrote to Gionet. Another wrote: “TRUMP GAVE YOU AN ORDER STORM THE CAPITOL NOW.” Soon after, Gionet followed another group of Trump supporters closer to the building. That feed eventually ended, but Gionet then posted a new video from inside the building. In it, he attempted to call President Trump on a congressional phone while commenters demanded more violence. “SMASH THE WINDOW,” wrote one. “HANG ALL THE CONGRESSMAN,” wrote another. (Gionet eventually streamed himself being kicked out of the Capitol building by law enforcement.)

Also in attendance in Washington that day was Ali Alexander, a prominent promoter of “stop the steal” demands on social media, which are predicated on the conspiracy theory that the election was somehow stolen from Trump. In the days before the rally, Alexander warned his 41,000 followers on Parler, “If DC escalates ... so do we.” He told his followers that on the day of the rally, “DC becomes FORT TRUMP.” And on January 6, Alexander urged attendants to “keep each other safe & rowdy.”



After the event, another “stop the steal” Parler account with nearly 200,000 followers celebrated the taking of the Capitol as “one of the biggest gatherings in history.”

The rest of the mob shared their stories to smaller audiences with posts on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. As Recode’s



involvement.

While many people viewing these images were shocked to see US democracy physically in peril, people in extremist social media circles were celebrating — emboldened and empowered by visuals of the rioting, looting, and harm. Almost immediately after news spread that a person was killed, some users on social media depicted her as a martyr of their cause, rather than someone who participated in what's been called an act of domestic terrorism.

The digital footprint left by the perpetrators of Wednesday's violence is serving as a kind of fodder fueling further extremism. And so far, social media companies have not been fully able, or willing, to stop that. Posts celebrating the events of Wednesday will continue to proliferate and could help encourage other similar events in the future, according to Robert Evans, an investigative journalist at the research collective Bellingcat.

"The kind of experience that a lot of people, especially the more extreme people, had on the 6th is not completely dissimilar to a drug," Evans said. "They got a very powerful high from storming the Capitol and they will be looking for the next high, the ones at least who don't wind up in custody."

Things could get worse

In response to the events of Wednesday, social media companies said they were amping up their response to take down calls for violence on their platforms. They also took more severe measures against President Donald Trump than they've ever taken before, with Facebook blocking his ability to post until the end of his presidency if not permanently. But many say it's too late, and not enough.

"The platforms haven't taken action over the past four years," said Jankowicz, of the Woodrow Wilson Center. "We've seen a couple standout incidents. But for the most part, it's been, 'Yeah, it's okay to post hate speech, we're just going to ignore it.' Finally, that line has been crossed."

That said, while limiting Trump's ability to post amounts to action, it doesn't come close to solving the problem of online extremism. And as Morgan, the Yonder CEO, argues about social media companies' role in all this, "There's no action that they can take in any given crisis that's going to undo the underlying problem that they created." Several members of Congress have echoed similar statements.

"These isolated actions are both too late and not nearly enough," said Sen. Mark Warner in a statement. "As I have continually said, these platforms have served as core organizing infrastructure for violent, far right groups and militia movements for several years now — helping them recruit, organize, and coordinate and in many cases (particularly in respect to YouTube) generate profits from their violent, extremist content."

Sen. Joe Manchin, meanwhile, called on Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey to suspend Donald Trump from Twitter for the remainder of his presidency, following Facebook's decision to do so.

Even if mainstream platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube further restrict Trump and the violent rhetoric of some of his followers, those followers may just migrate and empower fringe platforms like Gab and Parler, who welcome them with open arms. But it's clear that a reckoning with the platforms will continue and that their role in what led to the events of Wednesday will only be further scrutinized.

"We are going to be dealing with the implications of this for some time," Jankowicz said. "It doesn't matter that Trump's account on Facebook is frozen for the next two weeks. That infrastructure and behavior is part of society now, and the line between offline and online extremism — if there ever really was one— has been blurred."



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